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The Marxist Aesthetics of Christopher Caudwell

For British intellectuals, the years after the economic catastrophe of 1929 were a devastating experience.¹ Before their incredulous gaze, the old revenants of European history—mass action and the threat of revolution—turned to trouble the serenity of life under the Constitution. The certitudes of liberalism seemed unequal to these new and foreboding realities: the poor, for long the beneficiaries of reforming schemes and the corporal works of mercy, were suddenly the hungry, unappeasable proletariat; political contention, once expressed in the decorous alternation of parliamentary majorities, began to assume the form of a manichean struggle between Communism and Fascism. 'No one can expect', commented one of the leading intellectual journals of the period, 'that even if we now get through without disaster, we can long avoid social disintegration and revolution on the widest scale.'² Others, like John Strachey, attempted to find a new direction: 'As not only the last vestiges of freedom for the masses, but also the books, and the whole possibility of existence, for any who attempt scientific thought, go up in the new *autos da fé*, we shall all find that we shall be forced to choose between our own mental and moral suicide, and communism.'³

Strachey's feelings were shared by a growing number of intellectuals. Interest in Marxism quickened. Laski's *Communism* went through five impressions in less than three years; only two years after publication, Strachey's *The Coming Struggle for Power* was in its fourth edition. New periodicals appeared, like *New Writing*, which, though 'first and foremost interested in literature,' refused 'to open its pages to writers of reactionary or fascist sentiments,'⁴ and *Left Review*, the organ of the British Section of the Writers' International, whose inaugural statement diagnosed 'the collapse of a culture, accompanying the collapse of an economic system.'⁵ Early in the decade, the Bodley Head announced its Twentieth Century Library, which sought to redirect the prevailing emphases of social thought;⁶ and only a few years later, the Left Book Club could claim 40,000 subscribers. During the thirties, for the first and so far last time in their history, large numbers of British intellectuals found themselves compelled to pay serious attention to Marxism.

Christopher St. John Sprigg was one such intellectual.⁷ Born in London in 1907, Sprigg left school at the age of fifteen and joined his father on the staff of the *Yorkshire Observer*. In 1923, he returned to the capital and, with his brother, founded an aeronautical publishinghouse. For the next nine years, he devoted himself to poetry and scientific studies, supporting himself meanwhile by writing detective novels and popular books on aviation. In the autumn of 1934, after a summer spent reading Marx, Engels and Lenin, he joined the Communist Party. In the two years that followed, he worked hard to carry out his day-to-day party duties, and in his spare time, wrote the books which he signed 'Christopher Caudwell'.⁸ In December 1936, he enlisted in the International Brigade and went to Spain as an ambulance-driver. Less than two months later, Sprigg was killed while manning a machine-gun above the Jarama River.

The fate of Caudwell's posthumously published *oeuvre* is striking. His major work, *Illusion and Reality*, was enthusiastically received on its publication in 1937; and, whatever their ideological disposition, subsequent estimates agree on his pre-eminence among the English Marxist literary critics of his generation. Hostile commentators cite him as the epitome of all that was inept in this movement, and many Marxists in

the English-speaking world continue to remember him with respect and to attend to his arguments.⁹ Yet, in nearly forty years, very few attempts have been made to provide any critical assessment of this body of work. Summarily banished by some and uncritically sheltered by others, Caudwell leads a clandestine existence somewhere on the frontiers between cultural orthodoxy and Marxist theory. The present essay will attempt to provide such a critical assessment, and to clarify Caudwell's relations with his cultural context and with Marxist aesthetics. His most important production is indubitably *Illusion and Reality*, 'a study in the sources of poetry,' and accordingly, although his more general cultural studies will receive some treatment, the primary stress of the essay will fall on this text.¹⁰

British Marxism in the Thirties

No serious appraisal of the decade has yet been made. The popular after-images of 'The Thirties' (in the main, the handiwork of the contrite and the scornful) can be displaced only by scrupulous research and argument. However, one problem presses for immediate attention. Although Britain was not the only country to produce a radical intelligentsia in those years, 'the intellectual fellow-traveller' was not, as has sometimes been supposed, a globally undifferentiated phenomenon. It is necessary to delineate, however provisionally, the specific character of the Marxist milieu in which Caudwell was formed.

As is well known, the advent of Marxism in Britain was remarkably belated. Socialism had occupied an imposing position in Germany since the 1860s; and in France and Italy, Marxist thought had been current since the 1880s. No comparable local heritage was available to the *marxisant* intellectuals of Britain in the 1930s.¹¹ Deprived of a 'national' tradition, they were also unable to make significant contact with their counterparts abroad. By this time, the intellectual effervescence of the post-war revolutionary period had been stifled: anathemas and encyclicals, promulgated from on high, had all but silenced creative debate. The works of Marx, Engels and Lenin were, of course, available, but for their knowledge of contemporary Marxism, the British neophytes were almost entirely dependent on the officially sponsored writings of Plekhanov, Bukharin and Stalin. The memories of Trotsky and Luxemburg had by this time been thoroughly effaced; and the works of Lukács, Korsch and the Frankfurt School remained

¹ I have to thank Dr. Seamus Deane who supervised the thesis on which this article is based, and also Clara Mulhern and Peter Mair for their assistance in the preparation of the present article.

² *Scrutiny*, 1, 2 (June 1932), p. 15.

³ 'The Education of a Communist,' *Left Review*, 1, 3 (December 1934), p. 69.

⁴ *New Writing*, 1 (Spring 1936), p. v.

⁵ *Left Review*, 1, 1 (October 1935), p. 38.

⁶ The range of titles testifies to the scope of the revaluation: *Democracy, The Jews, The Schools, Prisons, War, Money, The Home, Literature, Communism, Women, Property*.

⁷ For fuller biographical accounts, see Stanley Edgar Hyman, *The Elusive Vision*, New York, 1948, and David Noah Margolies, *The Function of Literature: a Study of Christopher Caudwell's Aesthetics*, London, 1969.

⁸ *Illusion and Reality*, London, 1937; *Studies in a Dying Culture*, introd. John Strachey, London, 1938; *The Crisis in Physics*, ed. and introd. H. Levis, London, 1939; *Further Studies in a Dying Culture*, ed. and introd. Edgell Rickword, London, 1949; *Romance and Realism: a Study in English Bourgeois Literature*, ed. Samuel J. Hynes, Princeton, 1970.

⁹ See, for example, J. Middleton Murry, *The Criterion*, xvii, lxvii (January 1938), pp. 373-7; Douglas Gilmour, 'Testament of a Revolutionary (Christopher St. John Sprigg),' *Left Review*, 3, 6 (July 1937), pp. 352-6; Hyman, op. cit., pp. 168-208 (first two editions only); René Wellek, *Concepts of Criticism*, New Haven and London, 1963, p. 348; Andrew Hawley, 'Art for Man's Sake: Christopher Caudwell as Communist Aesthete,' *College English*, xxx (1968), Margolies, op. cit.

¹⁰ For reasons of space, I have confined myself here to Caudwell's theory of poetry. However, no major exclusion is involved: *Illusion and Reality* is almost wholly devoted to poetry; the novel is treated at length only in the brief *Romance and Realism*, and never, there or elsewhere, does it receive comparable theoretical definition; furthermore, 'poetry,' 'art,' and 'literature' are often used interchangeably in his writings, suggesting that the theory of poetry is the core of his aesthetics.

¹¹ The reasons for this tardiness cannot be discussed here, but see Perry Anderson, 'Origins of the Present Crisis,' *NLR* 23, pp. 26-34.

undiscovered. Precisely because they lacked a revolutionary 'memory' in the national past, British socialists were unable to find their bearings in the international present. Doubly deprived of socialist community, the nascent Left failed to emancipate itself from the tutelage of the English intellectual tradition. Historically, the responsibility for social criticism had lain largely with the literary intelligentsia. Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society* furnishes striking evidence of this strange and persistent osmosis: the social thinkers discussed in that book are, almost without exception, concerned primarily with the arts. The new generation of social critics was formed in the image of its predecessors: it was above all a literary Left. Its intellectual preoccupations were pre-selected by the very culture against which it pitted itself. Thus, while the decade produced no important political or sociological analyses of the British crisis, its output of 'revolutionary poetry' and literary criticism was truly prodigious.

These Marxist literary essays varied greatly in quality, scope and emphasis, but they were united in their insistence that literature could be understood and evaluated only in relation to the social conditions in which it was produced. Hence, literary criticism came to be regarded as the elucidation of the social determinations of a text, as the identification of the 'social equivalent' of a given character, sentiment or situation.¹² There was also a common limitation: although this criticism was newly sociological and political, no profound redefinition of literature was implied. Literature was a datum; only interpretation and judgment were controversial. The one Marxist critic of the period to escape these limitations was Christopher Caudwell, whose *Illusion and Reality* attempted a full-scale reconstruction of poetic theory. It is this new range and depth that make it the most important Marxist literary treatise of that or any other period in England. This book and its successors aim at nothing less than a unitary critique of bourgeois civilization.

The Bases of Caudwell's Thought

Caudwell's Marxism is based on two related theses, one epistemological, the other historical. 1. Subject and object subsist in necessary dialectical unity. It was Marx's great merit to have apprehended 'man's theory as the outcome of practice on the object, sensing as sensing of something,' thus superseding the sterile quarrel between idealism and mechanical materialism. Human cognition is neither the self-elaboration of an omnipotent Mind nor the impact of an omnipotent Reality, but the activity of the subject confronting a determinate objective reality in determinate conditions. Man 'must live concretely' before he can 'come to speculate abstractly'; and philosophy, therefore, must acknowledge the primacy of 'concrete living'.¹³ 2. 'Concrete living' is the object of

sociological theory; and the sociology which defines 'the general laws determining the relation of human beings at a given period, and the change of these relations from period to period' is historical materialism.¹⁴ The classic statement of historical materialism is, of course, contained in Marx's Preface to his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, but what is important here is the manner in which Caudwell reads it. The contradiction which propels economic production is the struggle between man and Nature. History is 'the development of humanity' through this struggle, towards 'the aim of all society', freedom from the forces of Nature.¹⁵ This contradiction between man and Nature is 'absolutely primary' to society: history presents it in successive versions, but in its general form, it 'drives on the development of all society'.¹⁶ These twin axioms constitute the necessary foundation of fecund social investigation.

The study of bourgeois society demands the addition of a third thesis, related specifically to that form of society. Bourgeois culture is grounded in an illusory notion of freedom which, from the moment of its enshrinement in 'the Renaissance charter of the bourgeoisie', has never ceased to fascinate and tantalize it.¹⁷ In its struggle against feudal social relations, the bourgeoisie generated the ideology of individualism—the bourgeois revolutionary depicted himself as 'an heroic figure fighting a lone fight for freedom . . . against all the social relations which fetter the natural man'.¹⁸ Freedom, it was understood, was the natural condition of man, and was therefore to be realized through the abolition of social relations. Man was most free when pursuing an individual destiny, unconstrained by his fellows. The new market society which was established as a result of the anti-feudal struggle appeared to respect this natural condition: it had dissolved all relations between men, leaving only relations between men and things, the institution of private property. However, this new relation merely disguises a *new form* of social relations. 'The market is nothing but the blind expression of real relations between men'; and, precisely because it is blind, it is 'coercive and anarchic', acting 'with all the violence of a natural force'.¹⁹ The bourgeoisie, constitutionally incapable of discarding the deluded ideology of its revolutionary youth, cannot see the market for what it is, and so perseveres in its rampant individualism, which, to its growing horror, seems to produce only 'the blind coercion of war, anarchy, slump and revolution'.²⁰ 'Individual freedom' is at once the indispensable justification of bourgeois property and the impossible utopia of the bourgeois soul.

The 'bourgeois illusion' is only one instance of the general phenomenon of 'commodity-fetishism which sees in a relation between men only a relation between things'.²¹ Not content simply to occlude human relation-

¹² See, for example, R. D. Charques, *Contemporary Literature and Social Revolution*, London, 1933; Philip Henderson, *Literature*, London, 1933, and *The Novel Ticker*, London, 1936; J. A. J. and J. P. Ward, 'Sketch for a Marxist Theory of Literature,' C. Day Lewis (ed.), *The Mind in Chains*, London, 1937.

¹³ *Illusion and Reality*, p. 8. All references are to the second edition (1946), hereafter cited as *IR*.

¹⁴ *IR*, p. 9.

¹⁵ *Further Studies in a Dying Culture*, pp. 133, 136. Hereafter, *FS*.

¹⁶ *IR*, p. 125.

¹⁷ *Studies in a Dying Culture*, p. xxi. Hereafter, *SDC*.

¹⁸ *IR*, p. 59.

¹⁹ *IR*, p. 58.

²⁰ *IR*, p. 60.

²¹ *SDC*, p. 138.

ships, capitalism also *deforms* them. In philosophy, it ruptures the subject-object relation; ethically, it permits no opposition to the violence of the bourgeois order other than its obverse, 'the creed of ultra-individualism and selfishness' that is pacifism.²² Its 'Midas touch' spares nothing. The essay on 'Love', though concerned chiefly to demystify the notion and illuminate its social determinations, is most memorable for its passionate condemnation of the sheer lovelessness of the 'cash-nexus': 'Today love could prepare an appalling indictment of the wrongs and privations that bourgeois social relations have inflicted on it. . . . In all the distinctive bourgeois relations, . . . tenderness is completely expelled, because tenderness can only exist between men, and in capitalism all relations appear to be between a man and a commodity.'²³ Thus, commodity-fetishism is the process whereby human society is atomized, and reconstituted as an aggregation of individuals united only in commodity-transactions; it performs a dual operation, in the one gesture fragmenting the experience of sociality and withholding the available forms of consolation.²⁴

The Bourgeois Illusion: Ideology and Politics

It is the central discipline of this general critique that protects the uncommon versatility of Caudwell's work from the dangers of eclecticism. Throughout a corpus of writing that encompasses established fields of knowledge (physics, history, philosophy, psychology), politics (liberty, schemes for reform, pacifism), institutions (religion) and 'mythologies' (heroism, love), this theme persists. The forensic tone thus achieved served both theoretical and political purposes. Theoretically, it divined the essence which, he believed, underlay the diverse manifestations of bourgeois culture. Thus, despite his unquestionable scientific advances, Freud was unable to extricate himself from the bourgeois illusion: he could not avoid 'visualizing civilization as the enslavement of the completely free instincts by culture', and therefore failed to discern the social determinations of consciousness.²⁵ In consequence of this, psychology aspired to total social explanation.²⁶ The 'fabulous' language in which he attempted to expound his insights was, in effect, a regression to obsolete positions. Ideologically, he succumbed to the disorder which he himself had diagnosed — neurosis. D. H. Lawrence was deceived by 'the same old lie'. His hatred of the commercial-industrial ethos led only to an exaltation of the untrammelled instinctual self, the 'freedom' of animality.²⁷

Complementarily, Caudwell's analysis offered elucidation of the extremely complex political conjuncture, exposing 'the crisis' as that of an historically specific form of society, and insisting on the necessity for profound social change. His attempt to define an authentically revolu-

tionary stance proceeded negatively, in critiques of the various reforming solutions then current. Among the principal exponents of such solutions were H. G. Wells, contriver of utopias, and George Bernard Shaw, hierophant of fabian socialism. The latter, Caudwell argued, sponsored an individualist conception of thought which vitiated his socialist sympathies.²⁸ Truth was conceived of, not as the outcome of collective thought and action, but as the soliloquy of the enlightened individual. Thus, socialist theory became a matter of ratiocination, commitment a paternalistic willingness to instruct, and revolutionary change, a successful argument. Shaw's ideal society, directed by 'intellectual Samurai', nurtured an embryonic fascism. Caudwell shared Lenin's estimate of Shaw as 'a good man fallen among Fabians,' but H. G. Wells was granted no such indulgence. The shaping force in his life was his fear of proletarianization. Literature attracted him, but offered no prospect of wealth; and when made to choose between further scientific studies and the maintenance of a domestic establishment, Wells had no difficulty in opting for the latter. Having sacrificed both artistic inclination and scientific ambition to his consuming desire for social success, Wells became an intellectual entrepreneur: a popularizer of science and a novelist of 'ideas'. His interest in social reform was genuine, but his fear of the working class inhibited his political vision. Relying instead on the powers of the 'free intelligence', he condemned himself to capricious speculation.²⁹

In large measure, these political errors originated in an epistemological failure (the bourgeois fracture of the subject-object relation): Shaw and Wells developed their ideas in ignorance of the concrete character of the social structure that they hoped to reform. Thus, in terms of Caudwell's distinction between 'the hero' and 'the charlatan', they were, decidedly, instances of the latter. Traditionally, the hero was an individual who could master both men and matter: matter, because, however dimly, he perceived the logic of history, and men, because he could give expression to the vague intimations of the future which agitated their hearts.³⁰ The charlatan, in contrast, is incapable of this. His ability to manipulate men is unaccompanied by any understanding of the laws of social change: 'he leads men back into abandoned ways and forgotten heresies'.³¹ No charlatan could ever divulge the secret of the future; historically, this has been the office of the hero. The communist future, moreover, calls forth a new kind of hero, one not only capable of the leadership of men, but also armed with a scientific understanding of social forces. Lenin was the prototype of the new hero who fully understands the nature of his task and the manner of its execution. He knew what bourgeois thought had barely glimpsed: that freedom resided not in the uncontrolled velleities of the instincts but in 'social relations themselves';³² that free, rational action was possible only if the agents recognized the boundaries which they could not transgress; that, in Engels' words, 'freedom is the recognition of necessity.'

²² *SPC*, p. 117.

²³ *SPC*, pp. 156, 150-1.

²⁴ This is the process that Georg Lukács termed 'reification'. Here and elsewhere, Caudwell's affinities with the Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness* are particularly striking.

²⁵ *SPC*, pp. 192, 186.

²⁶ *SPC*, pp. 185-7.

²⁷ *SPC*, pp. 44-72.

²⁸ *SPC*, pp. 1-19.

²⁹ *SPC*, pp. 73-93.

³⁰ *SPC*, pp. 20-43.

³¹ *SPC*, p. 30.

³² *SPC*, p. xxi.

The Theory of Poetry

The centre-piece of Caudwell's achievement is undoubtedly *Illusion and Reality*, a long treatise which takes as its project the constitution of a Marxist poetics. Since the study of poetry inevitably entails the study of language, and since language and all its specific constructs are social products, the study of poetry is inseparable from the study of society.³³ The 'sociological component' which literary criticism must therefore incorporate is historical materialism, which alone can disclose 'the general active relation of the ideological products of society with each other and with concrete living.'³⁴ Thus provided, the analysis of poetry can proceed, 'without falling into eclecticism or confusing art with psychology or politics.'³⁵ Caudwell's account begins with an anthropological discussion of the origins of poetry, which, for present purposes, is important only in so far as it inaugurates the themes which pervade his work. I will therefore confine myself here to two points: the development of language and the primordial function of poetry.

Everyday 'non-rhythmical' language originated in response to the functional needs of primitive man: 'the need to extend his personality, to bring it to bear on his neighbours, to bend their volitions into harmony with his, . . . would finally have given birth to the gestures and then the grunts which finally became articulate speech.'³⁶ This variety of language was primarily the means of private persuasion. Rhythmic language, in contrast, was primarily the means of expression of collective emotion. It possessed this power because 'poetry is characteristically song, and song is characteristically something which, because of its rhythm, is sung in *unison*.'³⁷ Why is collective emotion needed?—In response to danger men will instinctively be fearful, and contrary stimuli will induce feelings of well-being. This collective emotion, Caudwell argues, is 'required to deal with conditions not yet actual, but *potential*.'³⁸ Human life differs from other forms of animal life in that the existence of even the most rudimentary form of social organization requires efforts that are not instinctive, chiefly those of economic production. It was the need to direct instinctual energies towards these tasks that stimulated the development of rhythmic language. By way of elaboration, Caudwell evokes the conditions of the primitive harvest. The mechanism which organized the group instincts for the harvest was 'the group festival, the matrix of poetry'. In it, the object of desire, the harvest, became present 'in phantasy'. The hypnotic rhythms of poetry transported the primitive into 'a phantastic world' where the harvest already existed; and the reality of this world of abundance survived the ending of the ritual, to fortify him in his labours.³⁹ The character of the collective emotion changed with social development. Thus, the primitive hunting tribe, which lived in conformity with Nature, possessed an art that was 'naturalistic and

perceptive', and the more advanced herd-rearing tribe, which had begun to subdue Nature, developed a 'conventional and conative' art. 'The developing complex of society, in its struggle with the environment, secretes poetry as it secretes the technique of harvest.'⁴⁰ This labile collective poetry could not, of course, survive the emergence of class society. Therewith, the collective consciousness of primitive communism became attenuated, and the leisured classes, living off the toil of the stupefied masses, became the sole source of social consciousness. Poetry, once 'the maid-of-all-work in a simple tribal society', became the perfumed handmaiden of the ruling class.⁴¹

In the modern world, as in prehistory, the nature of poetry follows necessarily from the nature of its material (language) and from its 'active function' in society.⁴² Accordingly, we will now turn to these two factors.

Art and Science: the Two Poles of Language

Language is a social product, necessitated by man's social existence: 'Economic production requires association which in turn demands the word . . . By means of the word, men's association in economic production continually generates changes in their perceptual private worlds and the common world.'⁴³ Because social reality is constituted in the struggle between man and Nature, the word communicates not just 'a dead image of outer reality' but also an attitude towards it.⁴⁴ Hence, in language, the core opposition between man and Nature is expressed in 'the opposition between the rational content or objective existence expressed by words and the emotional content or subjective attitude expressed by the same words.'⁴⁵ In its objective function, language embodies the 'Common Perceptual World'—it aims to be a 'correct and compendious reflection of material reality.'⁴⁶ The function of the subjective component is complementarily opposite: it stimulates a 'feeling-tone' and, by making possible its communication, elaborates a 'Common Affective World'—'the "I" which men construct as a result of their social experience.' The subjective and objective poles are, respectively, the special properties of 'poetry (or illusion)' and 'science (or reality)'.⁴⁷ Each tries to purify its language by reducing it to one or other of the two functions: 'Science yearns always towards mathematics, poetry towards music.'⁴⁸ But such a reduction is ultimately impossible. The dialectic of affect and cognition is 'given in the way language is generated—in man's struggle with Nature',⁴⁹ and the complete victory of either would be at the expense of social reality: a completely subjective language would effect an anti-social 'introver-

³³ *IR*, p. 7.

³⁴ *IR*, p. 12.

³⁵ *IR*, pp. 11, 12.

³⁶ *IR*, pp. 25-6.

³⁷ *IR*, p. 26.

³⁸ *IR*, pp. 26-7.

³⁹ *IR*, pp. 27-30.

⁴⁰ *IR*, pp. 29-30.

⁴¹ *IR*, p. 3. See p. 31f.

⁴² *IR*, p. 136.

⁴³ *IR*, pp. 144-5.

⁴⁴ *IR*, p. 157.

⁴⁵ *IR*, p. 121.

⁴⁶ *IR*, p. 146.

⁴⁷ *IR*, p. 123.

⁴⁸ *IR*, p. 134.

⁴⁹ *IR*, p. 125.

sion', and a completely objective language would, like mathematics, reduce the world to a 'ghostly ballet of equations'.⁵⁰

The necessarily partial dominion of either factor has noteworthy consequences for the procedures of science and poetry. Scientific discourse seeks to expel the affective elements from its world, so that it can concentrate exclusively on the environment. But the dialectical unity of subject and object renders such ambitions vain (and moreover, since Einstein's Relativity Theory and Heisenberg's Principle of Indeterminacy, we know that scientific inquiry must consider the observing subject). Thus, in order to comply with the subjective component's demand for an 'I' to which it can attribute itself, science introduces the illusory but necessary 'Mock Ego'. The consequences for poetry are symmetrically opposite. Poetry's purpose is to define and transmit affects, to socialize them by inclusion in the 'Common Affective World'. But because the word has an irrepressible objective function, poetry contrives an illusory 'Mock World', unanimously accepted and simultaneously discounted by its audience. Mimesis, therefore, is a necessary side-effect of affective communication.⁵¹

A Social Dream: the Function of Poetry

The idea of the functionality of art is central to Caudwell's aesthetics—in one of his most acrid essays he wrote that 'Only those things are recognized as art-forms which have a conscious social function.'⁵² The discussion of this point begins with a consideration of dream. In dream, phantasy, in the form of apparently free association, supplants material reality. Although consciousness is a social product—the instinctive responses conditioned by the common world⁵³—and the phantasy, therefore, social in character, the dream-state tends to induce a return to the 'introversion of childhood', in which the 'I' is incontinentally paramount, and in which social reality is apparently inchoate.⁵⁴ To the extent that the 'I' undergoes this introversion, 'it is stripped of its largeness and humane value.' But for the same reason, dream is functionally more and not less valuable. For it is this aggrandisement of the 'I' that guarantees the 'ameliorative' role of the dream: in it, the 'I' can experiment with an external reality now phantastically transmuted into 'a plastic reality without the stiffness of material things.'⁵⁵ In dreams, the 'I' tests new social possibilities. The shortcomings of the dream-state—its infantilism and 'phantastic isolation'—were compensated for by its 'socialization'. By creating poetry, primitive man 'injected the dream into waking life [and] forced it to answer the categories of waking reality.'⁵⁶ This transposition dictated certain structural modifications. In order to preserve the crucial 'plasticity' of

dream, phantasy was obliged to differentiate itself from the simple perception of 'things round-me-now' and 'feelings-inside-me-now'. To this end, subject was severed from object, to give on the one hand the Common Affective World, the social ego and its Mock World of art, and on the other, the Common Perceptual World with its Mock Ego—science; the separation of time and space yielded, respectively, the evolutionary sciences and the story, and the classificatory sciences and poetry.⁵⁷

Poetry, then, extends awareness of the 'endless potentiality of the instincts . . . by revealing the various ways in which they may adapt themselves to experiences.'⁵⁸ The poet, who is distinguished by his unusual receptivity to new experience, articulates new feelings and, by incorporating them into the Common Affective World, wins for his fellows a richer awareness of their relations with the outer world.⁵⁹ Poetry, unlike dream, is socially responsible; and the purposes which it serves are, therefore, fundamentally economic. It 'soaks external reality with emotional significance', inducing in the organism an appetitive attitude towards it; and, thus emboldened, the organism can deal more resolutely with Nature in the course of its productive labour.⁶⁰ (The intimacy of this relationship is conveyed in the kind of metaphor to which Caudwell habitually turns: 'Art is the product of society, as the pearl is the product of the oyster,'⁶¹ or again, 'Poetry is . . . the sweat of man's struggle with Nature.'⁶²) Thus, poetry is the *psychological* agent in a general *historical* movement: by harmonizing *instinct* and *environment*, it facilitates the struggle of *man* against *Nature*. 'The change of the ego' for the purposes of social production 'is the value, purpose and mode of generation' of poetry.⁶³

The Character of Poetry

The substance of poetry is language.⁶⁴ If Arnold's dictum—'for poetry the idea is everything'—were valid, then contrary to common experience, poetry would be readily translatable. The fact is that although the exact 'sense' of a poem can survive translation, 'the specific poetic emotion evaporates.'⁶⁵ If poetry is not susceptible of translation, it must embody more than a simple idea; 'the word as word must have some component additional to the idea it stimulates.' This component is an untranslatable 'affective "glow"', the irreducible subjective dimension of language.⁶⁶ 'Poetry is irrational.' The 'rational' is that which conforms to 'the orderings men agree upon seeing in the environment.'⁶⁷ This 'environmental' or 'objective congruity', the quality of

⁵⁰ IR, p. 136.

⁵¹ IR, pp. 132–4.

⁵² SDC, p. 44.

⁵³ IR, p. 177.

⁵⁴ IR, p. 180.

⁵⁵ IR, p. 182.

⁵⁶ IR, p. 183.

⁵⁷ IR, p. 183.

⁵⁸ IR, p. 135.

⁵⁹ IR, pp. 203–4.

⁶⁰ IR, p. 217.

⁶¹ IR, p. 11.

⁶² IR, p. 130.

⁶³ IR, p. 236.

⁶⁴ IR, p. 128.

⁶⁵ IR, p. 126.

⁶⁶ IR, p. 129.

⁶⁷ IR, p. 127.

scientific argument, is distinct from poetry's 'emotional, or subjective' congruity. Irrational in respect of the environment, poetry is rational in respect of the emotions—it is 'just the expression of one aspect of the contradiction between man's emotions and his environment.'⁶⁸ This 'emotional congruence' is induced by rhythm. Because 'the body has certain natural periodicities (pulse-beat, breath etc)' that are not those of the outer world, any instance of rhythm will tend to intensify 'the physiological component of our conscious field at the expense of the environmental', and so effect the required 'emotional introversion'.⁶⁹ Poetic language is 'non-symbolic' and 'concrete'. A symbol, in Caudwell's usage, is a purely transitive sign: it communicates a precise intentional meaning, without instigating any second-order interest in itself. Poetry lacks 'external symbolism—reference to external objects'—but 'is full of internal symbolism—reference to emotional attitudes'.⁷⁰ (My emphasis.) However, since the word 'indicates both an external referent and a subjective attitude', poetry can never be devoid of external reference. It must, in some degree, be 'concrete'. Since 'emotions are attached to real objects', poetry displays a certain particularity—'reality hovers in the ego's vision'.⁷¹ Because poetry is concrete and yet non-symbolic, no statement made in a given poem can bind any other statement in any other poem. We accept poetry's statements only for as long as we remain in its 'phantasy world'.⁷² Finally, poetry is 'characterized by condensed affects'.⁷³ Words, being fewer than their referents, are 'over-determined' in their signification. Poetry, therefore, is 'cloudy and ambiguous', and its affects are 'correspondingly condensed'.⁷⁴ Not all affects are aesthetic in character. Aesthetic objects are such only 'in so far as they arouse emotions peculiar not to individual man but to associated men.' Thus, the first-person singular of poetry denotes not 'the individual in civil society' but 'the "I" common to all associated men's emotional worlds'.⁷⁵

In sum, poetry is an untranslatable verbal structure, irrational, rhythmic, fictive and characterized by condensed affects.

The Bourgeois Illusion: Modern Poetry

The concrete studies which supplement Caudwell's theoretical reflections are cast in the form of a literary history. But since 'the basis of literary art, . . . the contradiction which produces its onward movement . . . can only be a special form of the contradiction which produces the whole movement of history, the contradiction between the instincts and the environment',⁷⁶ this literary history is, properly speaking, a '*Sociology of English literature*'.⁷⁷ It is not possible here to

inspect Caudwell's analyses in any great detail. Accordingly, I will simply give an account of his general procedure, together with some illustrative excerpts.

It will be recalled that Caudwell posits an intimate connection between poetry and economic life—hence his opening designation of all modern poetry as '*capitalist poetry*',⁷⁸ and his subsequent assertion that 'all bourgeois poetry is an expression of the bourgeois illusion, according as the contradiction rooted in bourgeois economy emerges in the course of the development of capitalism'.⁷⁹ It will also be recalled that, for Caudwell, the essential feature of bourgeois civilization is its illusory conception of freedom, and that this illusion—individualism—is part of the wider phenomenon of commodity-fetishism, which reduces social relationships between men to proprietary relationships between men and things. Throughout the capitalist epoch, poetry has functioned as the expression of this reified condition. Caudwell's study of Modern English poetry makes a tripartite division which, appropriately, demarcates three phases in economic history: the periods of 'Primitive Accumulation', the 'Industrial Revolution', and 'The Decline of Capitalism'.⁸⁰ I will refer to the first and last of these.

Because it was an economic presence long before it achieved political power, the bourgeoisie could not by itself create the conditions favourable to the process of primitive accumulation. An alliance was therefore formed: in return for its support in his struggle against the feudal nobility, the monarch rewarded the bourgeoisie by tacitly licensing the excesses of its lawless upsurge. This was the period of illimitable individualism. 'Intemperate will, "bloody, bold and resolute," without norm or measure,' was the governing force in the literature of the time.⁸¹ This 'life-principle', found in its naivest form in Marlowe's *Farisus* and *Tamburlaine*, reached its apotheosis in the Renaissance prince, the embodiment of absolute will. 'Elizabethan poetry in all its grandeur and insurgence is the voice of this princely will, the absolute bourgeois will whose very virtue consists in breaking all current conventions and realizing itself.'⁸² The plays of Shakespeare, the 'spokesman' of the rising class, all had princely heroes who knew no duty except that of self-realization.⁸³ Shakespeare's greatness is demonstrated by the fact that he was a tragedian and recognized that the unfettered realization of individuality provoked 'the equally unfettered play of Necessity'. Othello's boundless desire for love and life brings on hatred and death; and Lear wrecks himself 'against the equally untempered expression of his daughters' will.' Thus, in his work, 'the contradiction which is the driving-force of capitalism finds its expression again and again.'⁸⁴ The enchanted island of *The Tempest* represents an attempt at an '*untragic solution*, a solution without death'. But

⁶⁸ IR, p. 127.

⁶⁹ IR, p. 124.

⁷⁰ IR, p. 130.

⁷¹ IR, p. 131.

⁷² IR, p. 132.

⁷³ IR, p. 134.

⁷⁴ IR, p. 204. See p. 200f.

⁷⁵ IR, p. 135.

⁷⁶ IR, p. 201.

⁷⁷ Hynes, *Introduction to Romance and Realism*, p. 25. Hereafter, RR.

⁷⁸ IR, p. 55.

⁷⁹ IR, p. 69.

⁸⁰ RR, Cls. IV, v, vi.

⁸¹ IR, p. 74.

⁸² IR, p. 74.

⁸³ RR, p. 40.

⁸⁴ IR, p. 75.

Elizabethan society intrudes even into this idyllic setting: in Caliban we see 'the bestial scurf' and in Ariel 'the apotheosis of the free wage-labourer.' The experiment was flawed and transient: Prospero broke his wand and Shakespeare retired.⁸⁵ Even then, in 'the virile Italian springtime of the bourgeoisie', the climate was treacherous.⁸⁶

Between this period and that of capitalist decline, there was one important difference. Even in Pope's time, the artist remained dependent on the patronage of the ruling classes, and had not yet become a producer of commodities. The poem, therefore, was not so much a 'self-subsisting work of art' as a 'movement from writer to reader'. The poet wrote for a stable, known audience, and so could consider himself as discharging a social function as 'inspirer of humanity or redresser of the follies of mankind.'⁸⁷ However, in the course of the 19th century, commodity relations became almost universal in literary production, with effects which became apparent in the late part of the century. The poet's final attempt to redeem his art from the meretriciousness of life in the market-place was the doctrine of *art pour l'art*. Appalled by contemporary society and socially estranged by capital's transformation of a familiar audience into an unknowable Reading Public, the poet succumbed to the form of commodity-fetishism appropriate to his kind: Aestheticism.⁸⁸ Finally ostracized from society, he became finally at one with it again: 'his too triumphant proclamation of liberty at last achieved in full, marks the very moment when liberty completely slips out of his hands.'⁸⁹ So ended the romantic revolution in poetry. Its history shows the worsening fever of the bourgeois illusion: for Keats, freedom lay in past societies; Wordsworth considered that it lay outside all societies, in Nature; Shelley located it beyond the material world, in metaphysics; in seeking it in a closed world of art, Pater and Wilde brought the movement to its inevitable sterile conclusion.⁹⁰ There remained only surrealism, with its purely personal significance and its source in 'free' association. Free association is supine before chance, and chance, dialectically, is necessity. The surrealist is the last and most naïve of the bourgeois revolutionaries, and with him, poetry, now wholly devoted to 'private phantasy' and therefore non-social, ceases to exist.⁹¹

The six-page table with which this section of *Illusion and Reality* ends confirms the impressions of this rapid evocation. In it, the history of English capitalism is divided into eleven periods (from 'Primitive Accumulation 1500-1600' to 'The Final Capitalistic Crisis 1930-?'). For each of these periods, Caudwell tabulates the corresponding 'general' and 'technical' features of poetry.⁹² The frequency with which the word 'express' occurs in his text is due to no lexical frugality on his part: it denotes precisely the relationship between poetry and economy

in his system. The bombast of Tamburlaine announces the birth of capitalism, and the babble of surrealism laments it in its death-hour. From first to last, the contradictions of poetry are merely 'a special form of the contradiction which produces the whole movement of society.'⁹³ We end where we began, with the struggle between man and Nature, 'first and onlie Mover' of the Caudwellian universe.

Appraisal

Systematic comparison of Caudwell's poetics with the writings of his English *confrères* or with the various currents in Marxist literary criticism on the Continent is beyond the limited scope of this essay. Nevertheless, it is important to remark those aspects of his thought which constituted definite advances and which remain topical today.

1. It has recently been observed that one of the defining features of English philosophical culture in the 20th century has been its acceptance of the positivist separation of subject and object, consciousness and reality.⁹⁴ These philosophical canons were not current only in official culture; they also informed the work of the early English practitioners of Marxist literary criticism—cases in point were R. D. Charques' *Contemporary Literature and Social Revolution* and Philip Henderson's *The Novel Today*. It was left to Christopher Caudwell to deduce the full import of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* and thus make a decisive philosophical 'break' with such dualities. 2. Having restored the unity of consciousness and reality, Caudwell was able to repudiate the notion of literature as *object* in favour of the more fertile idea of literature as *practice*. In *Illusion and Reality*, poetry is seen not as reflection, but as a specific mode of formation of the real: it is in no sense a transcription either of the individual subjectivity (expression) or of 'Reality' (representation); rather, it co-operates in the production of historically necessary forms of social consciousness.⁹⁵ This emphasis, which has recently been taken up by Raymond Williams (and which informs the semiotic enterprise), should be regarded as one of the most promising growing-points of literary theory today.⁹⁶ 3. This view of poetry as practice differs from phenomenological conceptions of the organizing subjectivity by virtue of its clear distinction between the self-present 'I' of experience, and the effective subject of culturally determinate discourses. For Caudwell, the first-person singular of poetry is the socially constituted ego of the 'Common Affective World': 'the artist does not express himself in art forms, he finds himself therein.'⁹⁷ (In this respect, *Illusion and Reality* may usefully be compared with Lucien Goldmann's discussions of the 'transindividual subject' and, again, with the themes of textual semiotics).⁹⁸ 4. In all, then, Caudwell's writings live out the conviction to which his English predecessors (among others) gave only

⁸⁵ IR, pp. 78, 79. Also RR, pp. 40-1, 48.

⁸⁶ IR, p. 100.

⁸⁷ IR, pp. 86-7.

⁸⁸ IR, p. 101f.; RR, p. 119f.

⁸⁹ IR, p. 109.

⁹⁰ RR, p. 120.

⁹¹ IR, pp. 109-12; SWC, p. 48; RR, p. 124.

⁹² IR, pp. 117-22.

⁹³ IR, p. 201.

⁹⁴ Colin McCabe, 'Situation,' in Stephen Heath, McCabe and Christopher Prendergast (eds.), *Sign of the Times*, Granta, Cambridge, 1972, pp. 12-13.

⁹⁵ See, for example, IR, pp. 132, 195-6.

⁹⁶ Raymond Williams, 'Base and Superstructure,' *NLR* 82; *Signs of the Times*, passim.

⁹⁷ SWC p. 43; see IR, pp. 150, 220.

⁹⁸ For example, Lucien Goldmann, *The Human Sciences and Philosophy*, London, 1969, pp. 27-8, 123f.

formal assent, that a valid Marxist intervention in literary criticism would inevitably recast the object and procedures of study at their very foundations. The superiority of any theory thus conceived to the partial revisions of a Henderson or an Upward is incalculable.

The admittedly summary comparisons which I have drawn above will at least serve to suggest something of the originality and enduring relevance of many of Caudwell's theoretical concerns. However, as Althusser has argued, intellectual systems cannot be considered simply as free associations of autonomous concepts. The specific operations of a concept in any given case are determined by the theoretical problematic within which it is set to work. I will therefore attempt to uncover the problematic governing Caudwell's thought, and its consequences for the articulation of its constituent elements.

Caudwell's Historicism

It is axiomatic that no Marxist literary theory can be more adequate than the conception of historical materialism which underlies it. For if we are to be theoretically consistent, our conception of historical materialism will *predetermine* our view of the very ontological status of literature. The criticism of Marxist literary theory must then, if it is to be truly radical, focus first of all on the question of historical materialism. Like Marx, Caudwell left no comprehensive account of this theory. True, *Further Studies* quotes the famous passage from the *Contribution*, but this alone does little to advance our understanding: this cryptic sketch is adduced by all Marxist theoreticians as proof of orthodoxy. With Caudwell, as with Marx, the theory is implicit in the concrete studies; it is to them that we must turn.

For Caudwell, the connection between economic and literary production is very close: 'poetry is clotted social history, the emotional sweat of man's struggle with Nature.' Its contradictions are 'a special form of the contradiction which produces the whole movement of society.'⁹⁹ His literary history shows how the particularity of a given writer eventually finds its place in the general movement of bourgeois consciousness: Elizabethan poetry and drama are dissolved in the general effervescence of rising capitalism; Metaphysical poetry 'expresses' bourgeois ideology in its anti-monarchical phase; and Aestheticism signals the final triumph of commodity-production. Caudwell's cultural studies also conform to this pattern: Shaw, Lawrence, Freud and Wells are in turn exposed as the victims of commodity-fetishism and dupes of 'the bourgeois illusion'. Sartre has observed that 'today's Marxists behave as if Marxism did not exist and as if each one of them, in every intellectual act, reinvented it, finding it each time exactly equal to itself'¹⁰⁰; and, more pithily: 'Valéry is a petit bourgeois intellectual . . . But not every petit bourgeois intellectual is Valéry.'¹⁰¹ It cannot be denied that Caudwell is incriminated by this charge. In his defence, one might justifiably retort that, in a situation

where T. S. Eliot could seriously attribute the crisis of an entire generation to a 'failure to grasp the proper relation of the Eternal and the Transient,'¹⁰² a certain extravagance of polemical emphasis was pedagogically necessary. But this 'emphasis' is more than just a polemical strategy; it is the manifestation of a basic theoretical position, which we must now attempt to elucidate.

Caudwell's theory is, in Althusser's sense of the term, *historicist*. It constructs a social whole that is 'reducible to an inner essence, of which the elements of the whole are then no more than the phenomenal forms of expression, the inner principle of the essence being present at each point in the whole, such that at each moment it is possible to write the immediately adequate equation: *such and such an element* (economic, political, legal, literary, religious, etc in Hegel) = *the inner essence of the whole*.'¹⁰³ From time to time, Caudwell's 'expressive totality' finds its appropriate metaphor: 'Elizabethan insurgence, the voice of primitive accumulation, thus turns into its opposite, Augustan propriety, the voice of manufacture.'¹⁰⁴ (Or, in Alick West's gloss: 'poetry is economic activity become articulate.'¹⁰⁵) Althusser's critique of historicism is by now too well known to need a rehearsal here. In any case, although it furnishes a point of entry into Caudwell's work, it remains a generic critique, of limited value in particular cases—Christopher Caudwell is an historicist, but not every historicist is Christopher Caudwell.

For Caudwell, the 'subject' of the historical process is the economy, which is constituted in the struggle between man and Nature. This polar contradiction reproduces itself at every social level, in a series of homologous, epiphenomenal oppositions: subject/object, affect/cognition, art/science, Beauty/Truth. Together they compose a unitary social practice, the historical aim of which is freedom from the forces of Nature. In the bourgeois epoch, the motif of freedom becomes an ideological obsession: the bourgeois is uniquely anxious to achieve freedom, and uniquely crippled in his strivings towards it. At this point the theoretical infirmity which implants a teleological ambition in history exhibits its characteristic symptom: empirical strain. Caudwell's 'illusion' theory cannot survive any prolonged exposure to the realities of bourgeois culture: Hobbes and Arnold, to name only two, may be cited against it, and it is doubtful whether Rousseau, to whom he ascribes the classic formulation of the 'illusion', ever really held such a view.

The master-contradiction between man and Nature is registered psychologically as the opposition between instinct and environment. Frustratingly, 'instinct', which lies at the heart of Caudwell's psychology, is the most labile of all his concepts. Nowhere does he provide a conclusive definition. At times it appears simply to denote the nutritive and reproductive drives; at other times, its signification appears far wider. At several points he states that 'the genotype' is

¹⁰² 'A Commentary,' *The Criterion*, xii, xlvii (October 1932), p. 75.

¹⁰³ Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, London, 1970, pp. 186-7; see also Althusser, *For Marx*, London, 1969.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

¹⁰⁵ 'On "Illusion and Reality"', *Communist Review* (N.S.), January 1948, pp. 7-13.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 130, 201.

¹⁰⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Problem of Method*, London, 1963, pp. 30-1.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

socialized in childhood, or in the course of history, but again and again it returns, never pacified, always requiring adaptation.¹⁰⁶ The *Modern Quarterly* debate focused on this concept and tried to clarify it, but, predictably, without success.¹⁰⁷ In the late essay on Freud, where one might reasonably expect a definition, there is only a hostile criticism of the idea.¹⁰⁸ This aspect is further obscured by grave terminological confusion: 'genotypical', 'natural' and 'instinctive' are identified with 'personal' and 'individual'; and 'social', 'public', 'associated' and 'collective' are conflated.¹⁰⁹ On the whole, Cornforth was correct to argue that Caudwell favours the notion of a practically unchanging instinctual structure, what Caudwell himself described as 'the unchanging secret face of the genotype which persists beneath all the rich superstructure of civilization.'¹¹⁰ Two consequences follow from this. Firstly, Caudwell's system introduces an element alien to Marxism, the notion of a fixed human nature, in this case a recalcitrant, ultimately unalterable instinctual man. Secondly, this notion injects a fundamental *timelessness* into the core of history: the forms and conditions of struggle may vary, but the struggle remains the same. Furthermore, in a number of passages this struggle is said to be between instinctual and cultural man.¹¹¹ History thus becomes the clamour of an unending psychomachia.

History and Psyche: Caudwell and Richards

The *differentia specifica* of Caudwell's historicism is now clear: it is, at heart, a *psychologism*. However, if this bizarre inflection distances Caudwell from the better-known exponents of historicism — Lukács, Sartre, Goldmann — it assimilates him all the more easily to the domestic context. In his recent study of English intellectual culture, Perry Anderson has perceived a recurrent 'belief in a fundamental psyche which is prior to societal determinations,' which, he argues, is the negative result of Britain's failure to produce either a classical sociology or a 'national' Marxism: 'a culture which lacks the instruments to conceive the social totality inevitably falls back on the nuclear psyche, as First Cause of society and history.'¹¹² Again and again in Caudwell's work, this regression occurs. His characteristic idiom operates a collapse of society into psyche, structure into essence (for example: 'a class, in the Marxian sense, is simply a group of men whose life-experiences are substantially similar.'¹¹³). How exactly was this psychologism mediated in Caudwell's aesthetics?

In the years after 1924, psychologistic tendencies became influential in literary criticism, mainly through the influence of I. A. Richards, a trained psychologist, whose *Principles of Literary Criticism* was published in that year. Richards' intention was to establish literary studies as a science, free from dependence on absolute values. Adopting an explicitly Benthamite stance, he argued that the problems of morality were basically a matter of the co-ordination of appetencies and aversions. Moral good was 'the exercise of impulses and the satisfaction of their appetencies,' and 'the best life' was 'that in which as much as possible of our possible personality is engaged.'¹¹⁴ The outstanding value of poetry consisted in its capacity to organize conflicting attitudes, to induce an 'intricately wrought composure'.¹¹⁵ The poet was an individual unusually open to experience, distinguished by his subtlety of response and possessing the power to communicate this experience, thereby refining the 'organization of impulses' and bringing about 'the widening of the sphere of human sensibility.'¹¹⁶ Richards took care to distinguish the referential language of science, which was subject to verification, from the emotive language of poetry, whose efficacy depended on its exemption from such constraints. The 'pseudo-statements' of poetry were concerned solely to harmonize emotional attitudes, and 'the justification of any attitude *per se* is its success for the needs of the being.'¹¹⁷ Poetry, then, was wholly functional: 'just as there are innumerable activities which require undistorted references if they are to be satisfied, so there are innumerable other human activities not less important which equally require distorted references or, more plainly, *fictions*.'¹¹⁸ (It was in this sense that Richards believed that poetry could replace religion and its surrogates as a source of existential coherence.) Poetry was thus a fully psychological reality, and literary criticism was, properly defined and practised, a branch of psychology.

It was no mere chance that prompted Auden to hail *Illusion and Reality* as 'the most important book on poetry since the books of Dr Richards.'¹¹⁹ In its main outlines, Caudwell's theory is a faithful reproduction of Richards' views. The major difference is that whereas in Richards, poetry operates on the relation between abstract individual and featureless world, Caudwell deploys it in the concrete tasks of material production. Nevertheless, it should not be assumed that this psychologism is the *source* of Caudwell's historicism. The dialectic of instinct and environment represents the interiorization of an antecedent problematic which, being founded on the master-contradiction between man and Nature, was *already* historicist. Equally, it should be clear that the reverse sequence is excluded. What we may observe is the unfortunate mutual attraction of these themes, and the manner in which the resulting theoretical couplet determined the subsequent course of Caudwell's thought.

¹⁰⁶ See respectively: *ibid.*, p. 98, *rs.*, pp. 133–4; *ibid.*, pp. 30, 136.

¹⁰⁷ Maurice Cornforth, 'Caudwell and Marxism,' *Modern Quarterly* (N.S.), 6, 1 (Winter 1950–1), pp. 16–33; George Thomson, 'In Defence of Poetry,' *ibid.*, 6, 2 (Spring 1951), pp. 107–34; 'The Caudwell Discussion,' *ibid.*, 6, 3 (Summer 1951), pp. 259–75, and 6, 4 (Autumn 1951), pp. 340–58.

¹⁰⁸ *rs.*, pp. 179–82; see also *ibid.*, pp. 158–92. Caudwell's attitude to Freud was, from first to last, an unsettled combination of admiration and suspicion.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 32, 44, 135; *rs.*, p. 137; *ibid.*, pp. 34, 36, 124.

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 203.

¹¹¹ See, for example, *ibid.*, pp. 124–5.

¹¹² 'Components of the National Culture,' *NLR* 30.

¹¹³ *ibid.*, p. 204. Note too the massive preponderance of psychological titles in the bibliography appended to *ibid.* The reading-habits of an autodidact can often be a telling indication of the deepest propensities of a culture.

¹¹⁴ *Principles*, pp. 44, 229.

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 22–3.

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 34.

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 222.

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 210.

¹¹⁹ *New Verse*, 25 (May 1937), pp. 20–2.

Caudwell's characterization of poetry is at first rather puzzling. Its closest affinities are with symbolist aesthetics. When he speaks of mimesis as a side-effect of emotional communication, one readily thinks of Verlaine's 'Paysages Tristes' or Eliot's 'Landscapes', but it is difficult to assimilate the poetry of, say, Donne, Pope or Empson to an aesthetic based on affect and the irrational. What Caudwell defines in general terms as poetry is in fact the poetry of a particular period; moreover, it is offered as a supra-historical category. How was this position arrived at? Caudwell's account of poetry is a logical consequence of his conceptions of language and of poetic function. Here, the secret of his inadequate conclusions should be found.

The function of poetry is to effect the psychological adaptations in the genotype which will equip it for its changing tasks in the struggle against Nature. Significantly, whenever Caudwell has occasion to illustrate this proposition, he returns to primitive society. In the course of a chapter on modern poetry, he writes: 'in the collective festival, where poetry is born, the phantastic world of poetry anticipates the harvest, and by so doing, makes possible the real harvest.'¹²⁰ Here, the timelessness of his history comes into play. Because he sees historical change as a surface phenomenon, effected by a principle unchanging in itself, Caudwell can abstract the relations between poetry and economy from a remote historical period, and draw from these a timeless definition of poetic function. The high public office to which Caudwell elevates primitive poetry has long since been usurped by scientific advance. Having long since lost its primordial social function, poetry now has a plurality of functions.¹²¹ As Anderson has shown, such ahistorical constructs invite, in fact necessitate, the support of a 'nuclear psyche'. The virtue of the anthropological paradigm is that it appears to reconcile the demands of historical materialism and Ricardian psychologism.

Already the implications for poetry begin to manifest themselves. But before coming to this point we must see how this account locks with the conception of language. Caudwell's binary classification aligns perfectly with the rest of his system of dualities: man/Nature, instinct/environment, subject/object, art/science; and now, affect/cognition. But although this is the only schema which the system can logically accommodate, it would be a mistake to regard it simply as its spontaneous emanation. The most cursory glance reveals it as the most tenacious of all received ideas about language. Caudwell's genealogy includes William of Occam, Dante, Milton and, of course, Richards.¹²² Cognate

distinctions have featured in Marxist literary treatises: Plekhanov speaks of 'the logical' and 'the contemplative', and Bukharin's twin oppositions, 'logical'/'emotional' and 'concept'/'image', are proposed by David Margolies, Caudwell's most recent champion, as 'an important contribution' to aesthetics.¹²³ The union of this conception with the theory of poetic function imposes a ruthless logical determinism on Caudwell's argument. Science, utilizing the cognitive dimension of language, investigates the environment; poetry, utilizing the affective and aspiring to the wholly non-rational condition of music, aims to know and effect transformations of the instincts. The fateful collocation of poetry, music, affect and dream can lead only to a quasi-symbolist aesthetic. It is, of course, of no particular importance that Caudwell was diverted towards symbolism and not, say, classicism or projectivism. What is at issue is the theoretical failure that brought him to this pass. Marx insisted on the crucial distinction between *general* and *historically specific* concepts.¹²⁴ A theory of poetry-in-general is the precondition of an understanding of determinate forms of poetry; and vice versa. But this, precisely, is a distinction which historicism is unable to grasp: if the specificity of an historical event is finally absorbed into a timeless 'essential principle', such a distinction is at best unreal and at worst a snare.

There remains the last, most destructive consequence: finally, Caudwell is unable to isolate what is specifically aesthetic in poetry. Instead, he is led to an equation of art and emotion.¹²⁵ As if sensing this difficulty, he writes: 'Aesthetic objects are such in so far as they arouse emotions peculiar not to individual man but to associated men.'¹²⁶ This discrimination depends on the serious terminological confusion noted earlier. Individual affects are articulated in language, which contains the sum total of emotion known to the social world. It is therefore incorrect to suggest that there exists an emotion that is non-social and yet capable of linguistic expression. Thus, the distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic affects is annulled. Art is emotion. Poetry is a psychological instance, and Caudwell has failed in his stated project: the provision of a knowledge of art that was not psychology or politics.¹²⁷

Epilogue

The preceding analysis has shown how Caudwell's basic problematic deflected him from his chosen path. A further consequence is the deformation of its genuinely valuable elements. The practice of poetry is subsumed into an undifferentiated unity of praxis, governed by the dialectic of man and Nature that is social action. The determinism of reflection is thus replaced by that of expression, and the marked complexity of the possible relationships between literature and social structure is placed beyond the reach of theory. The disjuncture self-present subject/discursive subject, assimilated to the opposition be-

¹²⁰ *ib.*, p. 69.

¹²¹ Even the relatively remote Anglo-Saxons exhibited considerable versatility in their poetic practices: the extant literature includes poems of political and social criticism, elegies, heroic poems, primitive 'encyclopedias', religious poems of an historical or mythic nature, and personal lyrics.

¹²² For a critique of this theory see Roman Jakobson, 'Linguistique et Poétique,' *Essais de linguistique générale*, Paris, 1963, pp. 209-48; idem., 'The Dominant,' Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (eds.), *Readings in Russian Poetics*, London, 1971.

¹²³ Margolies, *op. cit.*, pp. 41, 86-7.

¹²⁴ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, Penguin 511A edition, London, 1973, pp. 83-8.

¹²⁵ *ib.*, pp. 27, 29, 202, 206, 216.

¹²⁶ *ib.*, p. 135.

¹²⁷ *ib.*, pp. 11-12.

between instinctual and social man, becomes a weirdly refracted image of the bourgeois opposition individual/society.

Yet, to state that the concepts of a system are subject to the control of their overall problematic is not to claim that those concepts are fatally implicated in its collapse. It is indeed an 'innocent' reading that does not try to discern the problematic at work in its text, but 'structural reading' does not tell all, and to insist on it to the end is to fall prey to an unresourceful extremism, as rigid as it is 'rigorous'. Caudwell's insights may be unusable in their original context, but it is far from impossible to devise other contexts in which they could become productive. The point is not *whether* Caudwell is to be read, but *how* he is to be read. Caudwell's work is best seen not as a system to be appropriated or discarded as a whole, but as a copious source of insights and arguments needing critical reflection. Haldane's image is exact: Caudwell's writings are 'a quarry of ideas', a stock of raw materials to be worked upon and experimented with. Apart from those already indicated, several points deserve special notice. Firstly, there is his concern, unusual among Marxists, with poetry. Marxists have tended to concentrate on the novel, whose weight of direct social reference gives an ostensible head-start to traditional materialist forms of analysis. Caudwell's endeavour to confront the problems of poetry is, therefore, an important and welcome extension of the range of Marxist aesthetic inquiry—and despite its deficiencies, *Illusion and Reality* raises most if not all of the central difficulties in this sphere. The critique of the fetishism of commodities, developed mainly in *Studies in a Dying Culture*, is ambiguous in certain crucial respects; but it is to Caudwell's credit that it is wholly free of the irrationalist, anti-scientific bias that vitiated Lukács' thinking on this topic.¹²⁴ In Caudwell's thought, scientific reason and the 'totality' are in fact interdependent. Finally, I would mention his 'Faustian' drive towards omniscience and his 'impetuous' readiness to generalize, which have so irritated some critics. These traits should be numbered among his undoubted merits. Such hubris involves dangers, it is true, and Caudwell did not always escape them, but it also animated his writing with the 'totalizing ambition' which has always characterized the best Marxist thought. In the range that it demanded of itself, this *oeuvre* was indeed ingenious. But as the achievement of two short, crowded years it is remarkable. The Marxist criticism of culture is not so far advanced or so self-sufficient that it can afford to ignore it.

¹²⁴ His critique omits to analyse the role of institutions in the dissemination of bourgeois ideology. Also, it is unclear whether fetishized appearances are to be seen as 'real' or 'illusory.' For a discussion of the point in relation to Lukács, see Gareth Sredman Jones, 'The Marxism of the Early Lukács: an Evaluation,' *SLA* 70.

Bandiet

seven years in a
South African prison

Hugh Lewin

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Hugh Lewin was released from prison in the early spring of 1972 and to avoid a 24-hour house arrest left his country 4 days later on a British passport. He worked for a time on *The Observer* and is now Information Officer for Canon Collins' International Defence and Aid Fund, which supports political prisoners in Southern Africa.

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